DAVID CRYSTAL

A LITTLE BOOK *of* LANGUAGE

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YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS
NEW HAVEN AND LONDON

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Set in Minion by Yale University Press
Printed in Great Britain by TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Crystal, David, 1941
A little book of language / David Crystal.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-300-15533-4 (alk. paper)
1. Language acquisition. I. Title.
P118.C74 2010
400—dc22

2009037998

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CHAPTER 1

Baby-talk

We sometimes do some silly things with language. One of the silliest happens when we find ourselves in front of a new baby. What do we do?

We talk to it.

We probably say 'Hello' or 'What's your name?' or 'Aren't you lovely!' or something like that.

Why do we do that? The baby certainly hasn't learned any language yet. It can't possibly understand a word of what we're saying. And yet we talk to it as if it does.

The baby's mother is usually the first to strike up a conversation with it. Here's an actual example, which was audio-recorded just a few minutes after one baby was born:

> Oh you are gorgeous, you are gorgeous, you are, you are, you are, oh yes you are … hello … hello … aren't you beautiful … '

And she went on like this for quite a while, while she cuddled the new arrival. The baby, meanwhile, wasn't paying the slightest attention. It had stopped crying and had its eyes shut. It may even have been asleep. But the mother didn't care. She was being totally ignored and yet she kept on talking.

And talking in a very funny way. I can't easily write down the way her voice went, but it was something like this:

Oh
h
h
you
are
gorgeous,
you
are …

At the beginning of her sentence, her voice was very high, and she then let it fall all the way down. It was almost as if she was singing. When she said 'hello' her voice went very high again and she stretched the word out – 'helll–loh'. The 'aren't you beautiful' was very high too, as if she was asking a question.

The other thing she did, which we can't see from the way the words are written down, is that she rounded her lips while she spoke – puckering them as if she was giving someone a kiss. If we say something – it doesn't matter what – 'Aren't you a lovely little baby then?' – but say it with our lips pushed out as far as we can, and listen to how it sounds, it sounds like baby-talk. And that's exactly what people call it.

The lip-rounding is an important feature of baby-talk. So is the exaggerated melody of the voice. And there's another unusual feature of the way the mother was talking to her baby. She said the same thing over and over:

> Oh you are gorgeous, you are gorgeous, you are, you are, you are.

Now that's not very normal. When would you ever go up to someone and say the same thing three times in a row? We don't meet a friend in the street and say:

> Hi John, hi John, hi John. Coming to the shop? Coming to the shop? Coming to the shop?'

We would probably be locked up if we did that. Yet we talk like that to babies and nobody notices anything odd about it at all.

Why did the mother do it? Why do so many of us do it?

Let's think about it from mum's point of view first. She so loves that baby, and she wants to tell it so. But there's something else: she wants the baby to tell her back. Unfortunately, baby can't talk yet. But maybe, she thinks, if I can get the baby to just look at me, to see me for the first time . . . if I can just get the baby's attention . . . ?

We'll never get someone's attention if we stay quiet or say ordinary things. Instead we shout, or we whistle. We say something different, something noticeable: 'Hey, Fred! Over here! Yooo-hooo!' Think about 'Yooo-hooo!' for a moment. What a strange pair of noises to make! But we hear people make noises like that when they want someone over the road to notice them.

And we make different noises when we want to get the attention of babies. We'll never get them to notice us if we say ordinary things in an ordinary way. I've listened to many recordings of conversations with newborn babies, and nobody ever talks to them like this, in a matter-of-fact tone of voice:

> Good morning. I am your mother. This is a hospital. That is a midwife. Here is a bed. Your name is Mary …

That's the sort of language we'd use to talk to young children when they're a bit older. It's more businesslike, more informative. More like a teacher. People talk to two-year-olds like that. 'Careful. That's a hot tap. There's the cold one …' We don't talk to new-born babies in this way.

Now think about it from the baby's point of view. Here you are, just arrived in the world, and all sorts of things are going on. It's not been all that pleasant an experience, being born, and you've been crying a lot. But things are settling down now. You're warm, and you feel comfortable, and someone is making noises at you

– nonsense noises, but still … Are they worth paying attention to? If you're hearing 'This is a hospital. That is a midwife. Here is a bed' said in an everyday, flat tone, you might well conclude that this new world is going to be deadly boring, and you might as well go back to where you came from. But if you hear 'Oh you are gorgeous' sweeping melodiously from high to low, and repeated several times, well maybe this new world is going to be interesting after all! Maybe I should open my eyes and see – ooh, some rather interesting-looking lips! So who's that, then? She looks rather nice!

Baby talk is one of the ways mothers and others develop a strong bond with their babies. And it lays the foundation for the development of language. Without realizing it, by talking to babies in this way we are beginning to teach them their mother tongue – or tongues, of course, if the baby is in a family where more than one language is spoken. By repeating the sentences, and making them noticeable, we are kick-starting the process of language learning. When people start to learn a foreign language, they know what they need in order to say their first words. They need to hear them said, over and over, loud and clear, by someone who knows how to do it. It's the same with babies. If they hear the same sounds and words and word patterns repeated, they'll soon pick the language up.

But how soon is 'soon'? How long does it take babies to learn to talk? And which bits of their mother tongue will they learn first?

BABIES, BUDGIES, AND BANGS

We talk baby-talk to babies. But there are two other occasions when we use baby-talk.

One is when we talk to animals. If we listen carefully to someone talking to a pet, what we hear is something very like what happens when we talk to babies. Indeed it can be even more peculiar. And people don't realize they're doing it. I once recorded my mum talking to her budgie, and then played it back to her afterwards. She couldn't believe she sounded so strange! But the budgie didn't think so.

And the other occasion? It's when we tease our friends, and treat them as if they're babies. Imagine: you bang your finger on something and you look to your friend for a bit of sympathy. But your friend thinks you're making a fuss about nothing. You hold up your finger. 'Look, it's sore,' you say. 'Aw did diddums hurt a lickle finger den?' asks your friend. Of course, they might not stay your friend for long, after that!

CHAPTER 8

Learning to read and write

I ended the last chapter by talking about James having to learn 'to read between the lines'. He wasn't reading, of course; he was listening. That expression is an interesting example of the way we sometimes use the written language to help us talk about what's going on in speech. It's difficult to see many of the sounds that we speak, as I pointed out in Chapter 5. But it's easy to see the marks that we write. They are there, on page and screen.

Children learn about reading very early on – if they're fortunate enough to be growing up in a part of the world where books and screens surround them. Many parents read stories to their children before they are even two years old. Some have their child on their knee as they surf the internet. I know a two-year-old who had learned to identify some of the letters on the computer keyboard and could press them upon request. I wouldn't be surprised to find a two-year-old texter out there somewhere!

If children are exposed to books, they soon learn the basic facts of life about reading. They work it out that books have pages, and that pages have to be turned in a certain order. In some languages, such as English, people turn the pages from right to left. In others, such as Arabic, they turn them from left to right. They learn that books have to be held in a certain way – that pages (and especially pictures) look odd if they're upside-down. And they quickly find

pictures fascinating, especially of things they know about from their own world, such as people and animals and cars.

They also notice the little black squiggles that fill a lot of the page. And as they get older, they realize that these are the important bits. If a story is really exciting, it dawns on them that this is because the reader is somehow managing to extract the excitement out of these black marks. Here too there are rules to be learned. The squiggles are organized in lines, and these have to be read (in English) from top to bottom, and from left to right. Children exposed to books written in Arabic or Chinese have to learn that reading goes in other directions.

It doesn't take them long, either, to realize that a book stays the same, each time it's read. As a result, after repeated reading, they come to know a favourite story off by heart. Woe betide the parent who decides to leave out a page or two before bedtime! Once, after a tiring day, I was telling a bedtime story and tried to shorten the story of 'The Three Little Pigs' by going straight from the house of straw to the house of bricks. I thought it wouldn't be noticed if I made it 'The Two Little Pigs'. Not a chance. I got a severe telling-off, and had to start the story all over again, paying special attention to the house of twigs.

We sometimes don't realize just how much exposure children get to the written language around them. They see it everywhere – on shop signs and billboards, in supermarkets, on the front and sides of buses, on newspapers and envelopes, on the tins and bottles in kitchen cupboards, in television commercials and film credits, and, of course, on computer screens and mobile phones. Not surprisingly, then, many three- or four-year-old children have worked out what's going on, and it's possible to carry out some simple experiments to show this.

Collect a few pictures of objects, some of which have writing on and some which don't. An example of the first would be a bus with a number on the front and the name of the company along the side, or a shop with a name above the window. An example of the second would be a countryside scene or a group of people standing around. Then ask the child to look at each picture and 'show me

something that you can read'. Many young children can do this, even before they can actually read anything themselves.

We can do a similar experiment with pictures like these: a woman looking at a newspaper, a man digging a garden, a boy sending a text, and a girl riding a bike. This time we ask: 'Show me someone who's reading.' If the children are at the stage of being ready to read, they will point to the woman and the boy.

The next bit is the tricky bit – recognizing the different marks on the page. In English, there are letters and punctuation marks to be learned. In Chinese and Japanese, there are pictorial signs to be learned. That's quite unusual in English, which has only a few picture signs – such as £, & and @.

English – like most other languages – is written using an alphabet. 'Alphabet' is a word which comes from the names of the first two letters in the Greek system of writing: 'alpha' and 'beta'. In an alphabet, a letter stands for a sound. So, letter <b> stands for sound [b]. Letter <s> stands for sound [s], and so on. Notice how we need to use different kinds of brackets to show whether we're talking about a letter or a sound.

In an ideal alphabet, each letter stands for just one sound. That's called a 'phonetic alphabet', and languages which have phonetic alphabets are very easy to read. English, unfortunately, isn't like that. The English alphabet has 26 letters, but there are over 40 sounds in English speech. This means that some letters stand for more than one sound. How do you pronounce the letter <o>, for instance? It all depends. Say these words and you'll see: 'got', 'go', 'son', 'woman', 'women'. Sometimes it's very short, as in 'got'. Sometimes it's long, as in 'go'. Sometimes it even sounds like an [i], as in 'women'.

It gets worse. Sometimes two letters stand for one sound. Make the sound which tells someone to be quiet. If we write it down, we have to use two letters: 'sh'. Or more than two, if we make a really long shushing noise: 'shhhh'. And we can add an exclamation mark if we want to show that we're saying it really loudly: 'sh!' That's quite a lot to learn. But there are still more possibilities. We could write it 'Sh!', with a capital letter. Or 'SHHH!', all in capitals. Or we could turn it into a word, and write 'Shush'.

Capital letters add an extra complication. Although there are 26 letters in the English alphabet, when we write them down it turns out that there are 52, because each letter appears in two forms. We have 'big A' and 'little a', 'big B' and 'little b', and so on. Printers don't use words like 'big' and 'little'. Big letters are called 'upper-case', or 'capital', letters. Little letters are called 'lower-case' letters. These terms come from the days when printers used to keep the letters they needed for printing in two large boxes, or 'cases'. The different capital letters were held in compartments in the top box, or 'upper case'; the small letters were held in the lower box – the 'lower case'.

And there's one more complication. Each of these letters, upper-case or lower-case, can appear in a number of different shapes. Here are just some of the ways you might see letter <A> appearing in a magazine or on a computer screen:

These are all from different printing designs, called *typefaces*. We gradually learn to recognize that, despite all the differences, what we have here is the single letter 'A'. But to begin with, these differences can get in the way of learning to read.

However, despite all these difficulties, most children do learn to read well after a couple of years. Parents often teach them the letters of the alphabet before they get to school. Many have practised writing a few letters, such as the letters of their name. To begin with, they think that the letters mean their name. 'L' means 'Lucy'. 'M' means 'Mateo'. And letters take on other meanings too. 'X' means 'kiss'. 'K' means 'cornflakes'. 'P' means 'Parking'. 'M' means 'McDonalds'.

It's a short step from here to reading sequences of letters, such as 'Ben' or 'Dad', and saying them at the same time. Children learn that 'words' are things that have spaces on either side. And they notice the shapes of some of these words standing out on the page. In reading about Winnie the Pooh, for example, many children can point to such names as 'Pooh', 'Tigger', and 'Owl', when asked to do so, even though they can't read the other words on the page.

Then, the breakthrough. They work out that the sequence of letters <d> + <o> + <g> corresponds to the sequence of sounds they make when they say [dog]. And they discover that most words are like this. Not all. Awkward words like 'the' and 'cough' have to be learned in a different way, off by heart. But words like 'cat' and 'top' and 'swim' and 'strong' and 'tomato' can be sounded out letter by letter. And, after they've twigged that two letters sometimes stand for a single sound, they can sound out 'tree' and 'look' and thousands more words. Eventually, they won't need to sound out words letter-by-letter any more. They become fluent readers.

But 'sounding out' is a skill we never lose. It's something we all do when we meet a new long word. Here's an example. Try saying out loud the long form of the word 'DNA', which is an important concept in biology: 'deoxyribonucleic acid'. The only way to do this is to go through it slowly, bit by bit – 'de – oxy – ri – bo – nu – cle – ic'. Then have a go at saying it all at once. After a few goes, you'll be able to say it without thinking.

Some children work all this out for themselves, and end up reading simple stories before they get to school, and even writing short words. But for most, learning to read and write takes place in school. And it's usually in school that some children discover that they have a special problem in learning to read. They find it difficult to grasp the relationship between sounds and letters. They can't hold in their minds the order in which the letters appear on the page. Even after trying very hard, a page still looks to them like a jumble of squiggles. Children who feel like this have *dyslexia*, and they need extra help to get over the problem.

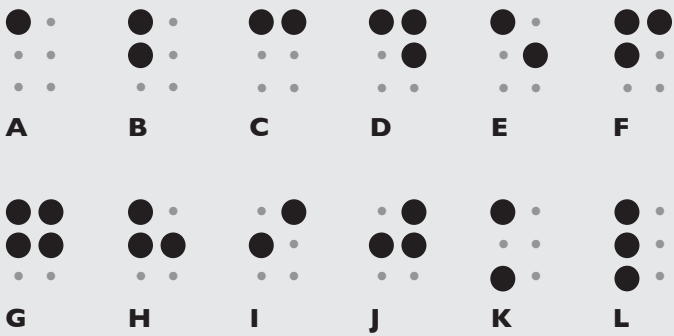
Once we've learned to read and write, we're said to be *literate*. People who haven't learned to read and write are called *illiterate*. There are millions of people around the world who are illiterate. They haven't been able to learn, perhaps because there was no school nearby when they were young, or perhaps the school had few books or writing materials. Even in such countries as the UK and the USA, a surprising number of people either can't read or have great difficulty in reading. And virtually everyone who speaks English sooner or later comes up against the problem of spelling. Why is English spelling such a nightmare?

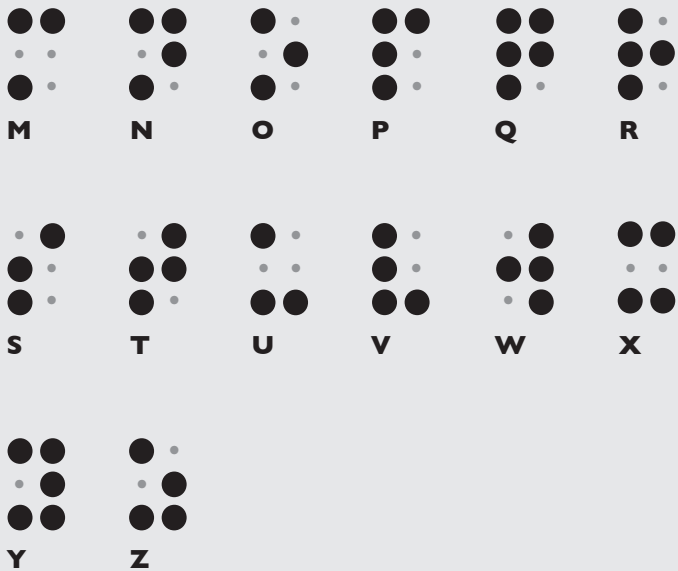
SPECIAL LETTERS

How do you learn to read and write if you're blind? One of the most widely used methods is called *braille* (pronounced 'brayl'), named after the person who invented it at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Frenchman Louis Braille. In its most basic form, each letter is shown in a rectangular cell by a cluster of raised dots that can be felt with the finger tips. There are special shapes for numbers too, and for punctuation marks and letters with accents (in languages like French).

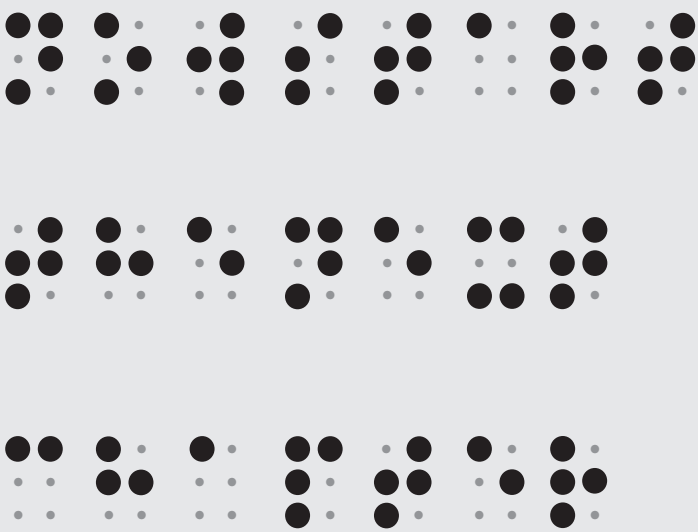
In a more developed version, there are shapes for some words – very frequent words, such as 'and', 'you', and 'have' – and parts of words, such as 'ing' (as in 'jumping' and 'going'). This saves a lot of space, especially in places where there isn't much room, such as on public signs or restaurant menus.

There are six possible dots available in each cell, and the black dots show the ones that are raised. For English, they are usually set out in two groups of 10, and a final group of six. If you look carefully, you'll see that K to T is the same as A to J, but with an extra dot at the bottom. U, V, X, Y and Z are the same as A to E, but with two dots at the bottom. W is the odd one out – because French didn't use that letter in its alphabet at the time when Braille devised his system.





Here's a sentence to decode:



Accents and dialects

It's one of the first things we notice. We meet someone speaking our language who comes from a different part of the country, or a different part of the world, and we realize that they don't speak it in the same way that we do. They sound different. They use different words and different grammar. The differences may even be so great that we have difficulty understanding them. Why is this?

The answer is all to do with accents and dialects. It's important to understand the difference between these two terms, so I'll take them one at a time.

A *dialect* is a way of talking that belongs to a particular part of a country. It uses local words and phrases, and often these are well known in other parts of the country. For instance, if we heard someone talking about a 'wee child' or a 'bonny coat', we'd be fairly sure they came from Scotland. ('Wee' means 'little' and 'bonny' means 'pretty'.) If we heard someone saying they were running down a 'jigger' or they were wearing a 'cozzy', then the odds are that they're from Liverpool. (A 'jigger' is the alley that runs behind a row of houses; a 'cozzy' is a costume, especially one for swimming.) And someone who says 'nowt' ('nothing') is probably from Yorkshire.

There are more English dialects per square mile in Britain than in any other part of the English-speaking world. This is because Britain has such a varied history, with Germanic people from

different parts of Europe settling in different parts of the country, some mixing with Celts from Wales, Scotland, and Ireland. It didn't take long before the settlers in one small locality developed their own special way of talking. But all countries have accents and dialects. In the USA, if we heard someone calling a group of people 'y'all' (= 'you all'), we'd know the speaker came from a southern state, such as Texas, or was copying southern speech. If someone said 'dropped eggs' instead of 'poached eggs', they'd be from the north-east, in New England. And if we sat out on a 'stoop' (the steps leading up to the front of a building) munching on a 'hero' (a type of sandwich), we could be fairly sure of being in or around New York.

Some dialects have hundreds of local words, and many of them have been collected into dictionaries. We often see books of them on sale in tourist centres around the country, and we can find lists of them online too. All we have to do is type 'New York dialect', 'Yorkshire dialect' (or whatever) into a search engine, and we'll get lots of hits. Or we can make up our own lists from the local words we use ourselves. Dialects are always changing, and the words young people use are sometimes different from those used by older people.

Dialects also have distinctive patterns of grammar. For instance, Scots English has its own way of saying 'not'. People who say 'I canna come', 'I'm no going', and 'I dinna ken' are likely to come from Scotland. In standard English, we'd have to say 'I can't come', 'I'm not going', and 'I don't know'. And several local dialects around Britain say things like 'five mile' (instead of 'five miles') or 'I saw thee' (for 'I saw you').

Notice that dialect words and sentences can tell us that someone comes from a particular town or city (such as New York), or a particular county or state (such as Yorkshire or Texas), or a broad part of the country (such as the north-east or Scotland). When we look at the way English is used around the world, we can even talk about whole countries. People talk about 'Australian English' or 'Irish English'. In Chapter 10 I talked about British and American English. Here we have dialect differences on a grand scale.

People in Britain say 'We walked along the pavement'. In most of the USA this would be 'We walked along the sidewalk'. Think of the parts of a car. In Britain we look out through a 'windscreen' at a 'bonnet'; in the USA we look through a 'windshield' at a 'hood'. At the front of a British car there's a 'bumper' and at the back there's a 'boot'; in the USA they are a 'fender' and a 'trunk'. We identify British cars with 'number plates', but American cars have 'license plates'. We switch on our 'sidelights' in Britain, but our 'parking lights' in the USA. Inside British cars there's an 'accelerator', a 'gear stick', and a 'milometer'; inside American cars there's a 'gas pedal', a 'gear shift', and an 'odometer'.

There are also differences in grammar between British and American English. Ask a British person the time at 3.45 and the answer will probably be 'It's a quarter to four'. In many parts of the USA it would be 'It's a quarter of four'. Someone from Britain might say 'I've just got a new coat'. The equivalent American sentence would be 'I've just gotten a new coat'. In Britain, they'd say 'The bus hasn't arrived yet'; in the USA we'd also hear 'The bus didn't arrive yet'.

Dialect differences, then, are all to do with vocabulary and grammar. That's the essential point to remember when thinking about the other important term: *accent*. Accents are only to do with pronunciation. Like dialects, they tell us which part of a country, or which country, someone comes from, but they do it through sounds rather than through words and sentences. All the dialects I've mentioned have an accent. People from Scotland speak in a Scottish accent. People from Liverpool speak in a Liverpool (or 'Scouse') accent. People from America speak in an American accent. And so on.

Actually, we need to be a bit more precise. It's better to say that people from Scotland speak in one of many possible Scottish *accents*. The way they sound in Glasgow is very different from the way they sound in Edinburgh, and people from other parts of Scotland sound different again. It's the same in England, or the USA, or anywhere. There's no such thing as a country with just one accent.

Nor, indeed, is there any such thing as a person with just one accent. Our accent changes over time, depending on where we've lived and who we're talking to. I've lived in Wales, Liverpool, and the south of England, so my accent is a mixture of sounds from all three places. When I'm in Wales, the Welsh bit of my accent comes to the fore. When I visit Liverpool, I sound more Scouse. And when I go to London, I sound more southern.

My accent changes, also, depending on the kind of occasion I'm involved in. If I'm giving a lecture in English to a group of students in Germany, then I'll speak a little more slowly and carefully than usual, and my accent will sound more like someone reading the news on the BBC. And when I'm on the radio myself, the regional features of my pronunciation become less noticeable. Once, someone from my home town, who'd heard me on the radio, stopped me in the street and said 'It didn't sound like you at all!'

But all these accents *are* me. They're all in my head, and my vocal organs can handle each of them. I often unconsciously slip into other accents, too. In fact, everyone does this. You meet someone who has a different accent from your own, and you start getting on well with them. After a while, you'll find yourself talking a bit like they do. And they'll find themselves talking like you do. You end up, both of you, sharing bits of your accents. Then, when you separate, you switch back into your normal accents again.

Why do we have accents? I've said that they tell other people which part of the country we're from. But it's not just which part of the country. Accents can also tell others about the kind of social background we have or the kind of job we do. Listen to the people who read the news on the radio. Sometimes they have a regional accent, and we can tell they come from a particular part of the country. But often they don't. We can hear their accent, and it could be from – anywhere.

In England, that neutral accent is called *Received Pronunciation* – or RP for short. It's an accent that developed at the end of the eighteenth century among upper-class people. You'll remember how, in Chapter 11, I talked about the way these people started to use standard English grammar? That was one of the ways they

found to keep their distance from the lower classes, most of whom spoke a regional dialect. Another way was to pronounce their words without any trace of a regional accent. If ordinary people all over the country dropped their 'h' sounds in words like 'hospital' and 'hand', then RP speakers would make sure they kept them in. If ordinary people all over the country pronounced the 'r' in such words as 'car' and 'heart', then RP speakers would make sure they didn't.

As a result, a new kind of accent came into being. At first it was used by the people in powerful positions in society, such as the royal family, bishops, professors, doctors, and judges. Then teachers began to use it in the big public schools (such as Eton, Harrow, and Winchester), and taught it to the children. There are many stories of children with a regional accent arriving for the first time at one of these schools and finding the older children (or even the teachers) laughing at the way they spoke. The newcomers would change their accents to RP within days! That was happening 200 years ago. It still sometimes happens today.

When these children grew up, many of them became lawyers and civil servants, or held other positions of power. Many joined the army or navy and went abroad. The nineteenth century was a time when the British Empire was growing. As new colonies were gained all over the world, British people were put in charge – and they all spoke with an RP accent. Before long, that accent was the 'voice of Britain'. It became the voice of the BBC. And, to this day, the accent that most foreigners are taught, when they learn to speak British English, is RP.

Since 1800, RP has been the chief 'cultured' accent in Britain. A lot of people simply call it 'posh'. It was never spoken by huge numbers – at most, by about five per cent of the population – but it was the accent that people associated with someone who was from the higher social classes or who had received the best education. That's why it was called 'received' pronunciation. It was seen as a sort of inheritance from your ancestors.

Other languages also have cultured accents. There are posh ways of talking in France and Spain, and in any country which has

a history of upper-class and lower-class division within society. Other parts of the English-speaking world have their cultured accents too. If you've seen the film *Crocodile Dundee*, you'll have heard Paul Hogan use one of the street accents of Australia. Not everyone in that country speaks like he did. Many Aussies have educated accents too.

Things have begun to change in Britain. The division between upper and lower classes isn't as sharp as it used to be. People with regional accents have obtained some of the top jobs in society. Prime Minister Gordon Brown with a Scottish accent. Huw Edwards reading the BBC news with a Welsh accent. If people telephone a call centre to get information about train times, or how to insure a car, the person on the other end of the phone will very likely have a regional accent these days. Once upon a time, you'd only have heard RP. A few years ago, linguists did a survey of the accents used in call centres in Britain, and they found that Edinburgh and Yorkshire accents were the most popular. And some accents, such as those from Birmingham or Newcastle, were hardly used at all.

People have strong feelings about accents. They think of them as 'beautiful' and 'ugly', 'intelligent' and 'stupid', 'musical' and 'harsh', and much more. But accents can't be classified in this way. What one person hears as melodious, another hears as grating. And some of the accents that are felt to be unpleasant by people inside a country are considered delightful by people outside. The Birmingham accent is often given a low rating by people from England. But when I played several accents to a group of foreigners who didn't know much English, they thought Brummie was one of the most beautiful ones.

Why do we have such strong feelings about accents – and about dialects too? It's all part of a larger story to do with the way language expresses our identity.

WHO'S THERE?

There have always been accents and dialects. The earliest writings in English have differences in spelling, vocabulary, and grammar which show that the authors came from different parts of the country. And if we go back much further, to the time when humans began to talk, we can guess that there would have been accents then too.

Imagine. You're in your cave, and it's a dangerous world outside. You hear a noise, so you call out (in your primitive speech) 'Who's there?' A voice replies. If you recognize the accent of the voice as one that belongs to your tribe, then you'll go outside happily to see what they want. But if you call out 'Who's there?' and you don't recognize the accent, you'd better take your club with you when you go outside, and be on your guard. A strange voice probably means an enemy.

If evolution is a matter of the 'survival of the fittest', then I think accents may have helped. Those who had the best ear for accents may have lived longer. And actually, when you think about it, it's not so different today. I can think of some places where the sound of an alien accent immediately puts people on their guard. Probably you can too.

CHAPTER 24

Slang

What do you make of this conversation?

> Bill: I'm gonna take the Porker down to the bakery for some rolls.
> Ben: I'll come with you, man. I need some juice for my Pug too.

It sounds very odd. Somebody taking a pig to a shop to get it some bread? And buying fruit juice for a dog?

But it's only odd if we don't realize that this is a special kind of 'cool' language used by some people who are mad keen on cars. To understand it, we need to translate the words like this:

Porker	Porsche
bakery	petrol/gas station
rolls	petrol/gas
juice	petrol/gas
Pug	Peugeot

The world of cars is full of words like this. Here are some more:

shoes	wheels

windair	conditioning
boots	tyres
Roller	Rolls Royce
Landy	Land Rover

So now you should be able to understand this next sentence:

I need new boots for the shoes on my Landy.

Words like 'shoes' and 'bakery' are part of automobile slang.

What is slang? There's an old rhyme which goes like this:

The chief use of slang
Is to show you're one of the gang.

This doesn't mean 'gang' in the sense of a band of youths or criminals who fight in the streets. It means a group of people who have the same kind of interests and background. There are hundreds of different kinds of slang in a language. When a group of doctors get together to talk shop, we could say they form a sort of gang. So do a group of lawyers or footballers or teachers. And if we listened to the members of one of these gangs talking to each other, we'd hear them use lots of words that belong only in their world.

How do I know about these words? Do I belong to the world of cool racers and hot rods? Well, actually, no. So when I talk about cars, I don't myself use such words as 'bakery' and 'shoes'. But as a linguist I keep my ears open, and hear these words in the cinema and on television. And I keep my eyes open too. There are several internet sites which provide lists of auto slang, compiled by the people who do use these words every day.

Linguists love collecting slang. It's a bit like collecting stamps – or maybe birdwatching would be a better comparison. Listen! There's a new word I haven't heard before! What does it mean? Who uses it? I'll write it down in my notebook. I remember going to the doctor's a few years ago, and as he wrote out a prescription for some medicine he muttered: 'I think you'd better have some

bug-juice'. I wrote that down as soon as I left the surgery. He meant 'antibiotics'.

'Bug-juice' is a piece of medical slang. Normally, doctors would use it only when talking to other medical people. So why did he use it to me? I'm not a doctor. Probably it was because we were friends and had a similar background. When people have a lot in common, they share their slang with each other.

Slang is actually quite difficult for linguists to find out about. You will have your local slang that you use in your school or in your town, and there's no way I would ever know about it unless you told me what it was. Indeed, in your area you'll probably have several different kinds of slang. The slang that kids use in primary school is likely to be different from what is used in secondary school. If your town has several schools, there are often differences in the kind of slang heard in each school. And there may even be words that are used differently within a single school. I once worked with a group of students in the final year of senior school, who listened out for the slang used in their school. They found that the slang used by first-year students was very different from their own.

That's one of the things about slang. It changes so quickly. Words that are 'in' this year might be 'out' next year. Here are some of the slang words that were in fashion a few years ago. Do you still use them now?

bling	fancy jewellery
bones	money
phat	cool, great
sup, wassup	what's up?
wicked	cool, great
yo	hello

And here are some of the slang words that were used back in the 1960s and 1970s:

blast	great time
bread	money

bug	irritate
dig?	understand?
fab	fabulous, fantastic
far out	excellent
funky	neat, cool
groovy	great, cool
pad	house, home

You may know some of these words because you've heard older people use them, or perhaps you've seen a movie (such as *Grease*) where some of them turn up. And maybe you use one or two yourselves. But most of them belong to 40 years ago.

The further back in time we go, the more difficult it is to understand the slang people use. In Victorian England, people on the street would talk about a 'billy' (a handkerchief), a 'dipper' (a pickpocket), and 'luggers' (earrings). And what do you think the innkeeper means when he calls his friend a 'bully rook' in Shakespeare's play *The Merry Wives of Windsor*? That was slang in the sixteenth century for a 'fine fellow'.

Some linguists have been very daring, in tracking down slang. One scholar, Eric Partridge, used to go into the back streets of London and ask shady characters about the kind of slang they used. A gun, for instance, might be called a 'cannon', a 'rod', a 'heater', or other less obvious names, such as a 'biscuit'. I'm glad he lived to tell the tale!

It's less dangerous to explore home-grown slang. Most households have made-up words that are known only by the members of the family, or their close friends and relatives. For instance, do you have a special name in your house for the remote control that changes the channels on your TV? Here are just a few of the pet names that people have used for this device:

bimmer	pinger
blapper	plinky
dibber	podger
donker	pringer

dooberry	splonker
flicker	woojit

A collection of these family words was published in 2008. The editors called their book *Kitchen Table Lingo*.

Slang is used by people who want to show, by the way they talk, that they belong together. It's very informal, casual, colloquial. It's like a secret language, known only to the people who are members of the group. It's therefore very different from the standard use of a language, as I described it in Chapter 10. A standard language, like Standard English, uses words that are there for everyone to use. If we want our speech and writing to be understood by as many people as possible, we have to avoid slang.

When we learn a language, then, one of the things we need to do is learn which words are standard and which are slang. And we need to remember not to mix them up. It's natural and normal to use slang when talking with our friends. If we didn't, and used only standard English, they'd think us a bit weird. But equally, we should avoid slang when we're talking to a general audience. We won't hear BBC or CNN announcers using slang, for instance, because they need to have their language understood by all their listeners.

And it's especially important not to use slang when writing something that's going to be read by people who don't belong to your own little group. If you forget this, you can get into trouble. If you put slang words into a school essay, for instance, don't be surprised to get it back with the words corrected. This will be another reason (along with the one I mentioned on p.68) why you'll get low marks.

We won't find slang words in print – unless, of course, the writer is deliberately trying to show how people talk, as in a crime novel. Just occasionally, in this book, you'll see me use a slang expression – and when I do, I put it in inverted commas, to show that it's a special usage. You'll see an example if you look back at the second paragraph of this chapter. And there's another one coming up in the middle of Chapter 25.

WOULD YOU ADAM AND EVE IT?

About 200 years ago, people living in the East End of London (Cockneys) began to use rhyming phrases to replace certain words. Instead of saying 'feet', they said 'plates of meat'. Instead of saying 'stairs', they said 'apples and pears'. So you might hear sentences like this:

I hurt my plates of meat coming down the apples and pears.

Why did they do it? Probably just for fun. But criminals also used such phrases to make it difficult for the police to understand what they were saying.

Here are some other examples of what is called 'rhyming slang'.

Hampstead Heath	teeth
lump of lead	head
artful dodger	lodger
lean and lurch	church
Adam and Eve	believe

The process of making up new rhymes still goes on today. What do you think these mean?

He's on the Adrian Mole.
I want an Ali G.
She was wearing her Barack Obamas.

I don't know whether these are used very often, but they've all been invented just in the last few years.

Answers: He's on the dole.
I want a pee.
She was wearing her pyjamas.

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£14.99 Hardback * ISBN: 978-0-300-155334 * Publication Date: March 2010
40 specially commissioned illustrations

YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS
NEW HAVEN AND LONDON
yalebooks.com www.yalebooks.co.uk

ISBN 978-0-300-15533-4
9 780300 155334